

## THE VISION OF THE MUSLIM IN EARLY MALTESE POETRY (EIGHTEENTH-NINETEENTH CENTURIES)

### *The Maltese language*

The Maltese language is the only national language in Europe of Semitic origin. It was formed during the Arab occupation of the island (870-1091 AD), even though recently discovered sources state that the island was completely abandoned by the Arabs until 1049 (Brincat 1995). If these sources were to be confirmed, that would mean that the genesis of the Maltese language could be backdated to the year 1049 AD.

With the re-romanisation of the island from 1091 AD, due to the arrival of the Normans from Sicily (Cassola 1992a: 861), the original Semitic basis of the Maltese language was enriched by the addition of lexes of Romance origin, in particular Sicilian. The Romance element was further strengthened from 1530 onwards, when Charles V ceded the Maltese archipelago to the Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, who had adopted Tuscan Italian as their common language of communication and administration. The peaceful co-habitation of the Semitic and Romance components in the Maltese language makes it possible for the latter to adapt, in some cases, to the morphological mechanisms typical of Semitic (Cassola 1993: 235-236).

When the British occupied Malta in 1800, the local vernacular had already asserted its own peculiar identity. The long period of British domination (1800-1964 AD) was to contribute further to the development of the Maltese language. In fact, as the years went by, but especially during the latter part of this century, the Maltese language was further enriched with a third component, the Anglo-Saxon one, especially in the technical and scientific fields. For its unique tri-dimensional and tri-cultural features, the Maltese language has been defined a *mixed language* (Aquilina 1970).

The process of evolution and transformation of the Maltese language has been so intense that it would seem that today the number of words of non-Semitic origin has actually surpassed those of Arabic origin (Brincat 1996).

## Early Maltese Literature

Apart from two notable exceptions, the Maltese language was not used as a medium for the writing of literature until well into the eighteenth century. In fact, after the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, the languages which the Maltese adopted in order to write their literature were Arabic, Latin, Sicilian and Tuscan Italian.

The first writers of the "modern" period who are known to have been born in Malta actually utilised Arabic as the linguistic medium for their literary production. These were 'Abd Allāh Ibn as-Samantī al-Māliti, 'Uthmān Ibn 'Abd ar-Raḥmān, nicknamed Ibn as-Sūsī, and Abū al-Qāsim Ibn Ramadān al-Māliti. The Sicilian historian Michele Amari, who has reproduced their verse in Italian translation, groups them together with their contemporary writers who were born in Sicily, since they all wrote and recited their Arabic verses around the year 1150 AD, in Roger II's Palermitan court (Cassola 1991: 57-59).

With the arrival of the Normans in 1091 AD, Latin was reintroduced in the island as the language of administration and, from the fifteenth century onwards, Sicilian became the second language of administration. These administrative decisions were to leave their mark also in the field of literature. It is a well-known fact that at the beginning of the sixteenth century the Maltese notary Giacomo Bondin used to write epigrams in Latin (Wettinger-Fsadni 1968: 28). We also have a poem, entitled *O Melita Infelix* and written in Latin by Luca de Armenia, which deals with the woes and sorrows of the Maltese during the famous 1565 Siege of Malta (Cassar 1981). Such works are indicative of literary activity in the Latin language, which must have been quite productive amongst the cultured classes of the island.

As regards the use of Sicilian as a literary language, it is thought that the *Vita di San Cono*, a work written in 1371 which has gone lost, was written in Sicilian. The author of this work, Giovanni Aragona, is believed by some to be Maltese and by others to be Sicilian (Cassola 1991: 59). In the seventeenth century, one comes across *Parenti certu si di tali pasta*, a sonnet written entirely in Sicilian by Marcello Attardo de Vagnoli. This sonnet forms part of Attardo's *Canzoniere*, which has only recently been published (Attardo de Vagnoli 1994: 133).

However, the real language of early Maltese literature is Tuscan Italian. From 1530, year of the arrival in Malta of the Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, Tuscan was adopted as the language of the administration, and this was to bear a strong influence on literary circles too, since Italian basically became the language of all literary genres: from lyric poetry to historiography; from pastoral poetry to

travel memoirs, from the picaresque novel to the theatre. This situation was to persist until late in the nineteenth century.

As already stated, the Maltese language appears only twice in the linguistic-literary context just drawn up. The first document in the Maltese language is a poem of twenty verses, the *Cantilena* by P. Caxaro, which dates back to the last decades of the fifteenth century, but has come down to us in an early sixteenth-century copy (Wettinger-Fsadni 1968). Apart from its immense historical and linguistic value, the reference to the Maltese language in the *Cantilena* manuscript (*quam lingua melitea hic subicio*), confirms that a certain number of cultured Maltese of the period were quite conscious of their vernacular being a *language*. One has to then wait for nearly another two hundred years for the second literary text in Maltese: the sixteen verse *Sonetto* by G.F. Bonamico, which was to be the prelude to an eighteenth-century literary tradition, albeit a weak one, in the Maltese language.

### *L-Gharusa tal-Mosta*

The ballad entitled *L-Gharusatal-Mosta* (*The Maiden of Mosta*. See Friggieri 1987: 151-152; Cassar Pullicino 1964: 16-17) was first published by the Italian linguist Luigi Bonelli in 1897. However, the general theme of the ballad, which deals with the kidnapping of a young Maltese maiden by the Turks; the fact that the episode is related in an eighteenth-century manuscript conserved at the National Library of Malta (Ms. 1146, vol. I, p. 256) and mentioned by Count Ciantar in his 1725 Latin translation of G. F. Abela's *Descrittione di Malta*; the fact that various authors, such as the Italian Michelangelo Bottari and the Maltese Nicola Zammit and Gużè Muscat Azzopardi, published historical novels in Italian and Maltese which were based on the same episode (respectively, *La sposa della Musta* [published between 1856-60]; *Angelica, o la sposa della Mosta* [1862] and *L-Gharusa tal-Mosta* [1878]); and the fact that Cassar Pullicino (1964: 15) manages to trace different variants of this legend right up to the middle of this century indicates that, at least in oral tradition, this ballad must have been one of the oldest non-religious texts in Maltese.

Indeed, something quite similar to what is lamented in the *Gharusa tal-Mosta* actually really happened during the 1565 Great Siege, when the powerful Turkish armada was sent by Süleyman to conquer Malta.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On the 1565 Great Siege of Malta, cf. Balbi di Correggio 1961, Cassola 1995, and Cassola-Bostan-Scheben 1998.

The Italian soldier Francisco Balbi di Correggio, who was fighting on the side of the Christians during this siege, describes the episode quite vividly in his account of the 1565 events:

When the (Turkish) fleet came upon Malta, sixty Maltese, men and women, of all conditions, having fled from their village, took refuge in a cavern by the sea, and there they continued to live. Among these women was a maiden of great beauty. These refugees were discovered by the Turks who overran the Island. They left them unmolested but they reported their find to the Sanjaz-Bey, who, as we came to know, went to the cavern and, enamoured with the maiden, took her apart while the other Turks conversed with the rest of the Maltese.... (Later), the Sanjaz-Bey, despairing of escape, cut off the maiden's head with one stroke of his scimitar (Balbi di Correggio 1961: 91-92).

This historical episode inspired quite a number of Maltese works during the nineteenth century, such as *Catarina* (1847) by Luigi Rosato and *Toni Bajada* (1878) and *Ix-Xbejba tar-Rdum* (*The Maiden of the Cliffs*) (1878) by Ġużè Muscat Azzopardi.

In *L-Gharusa tal-Mosta*, the Turks do not act in such a cruel way towards the poor Maltese maiden: it is true that they capture her on a Monday when the girl, totally unprepared for such kidnapping, is actually getting ready for her marriage. However, despite the fact that they are described as "ħaljin" ('wasteful'), they do not really maltreat her. What they are really intent on doing is make her give up her Western clothes and traditions and take up the Muslim ones. The Pasha to whom she is offered gives her beautiful clothes and rich food. But the girl refuses to eat unless she is sent back to her native village.

The Maltese maiden is then made an offer which no normal person would refuse: if she complies with the demands of her captors, she is to be declared the Queen of Jerba ("Nagħmluk sultana ta' Ġirba"). But the girl continues in her obstinacy: in her perception the Turks are nothing but berbers ("ibirba") and therefore she can never accept to be their Queen! Here, we encounter a *cliché* of Maltese literature: any Muslim, whether coming from North Africa or any other area, is normally called a *Turk*. This fact is to be attributed to the multi-secular rivalry between the Knights of Malta and the Ottoman Empire. And the automatic identification of Muslims with Turks is also reflected at linguistic level. So much so, that in the oldest dictionary of the Maltese language, which dates to the seventeenth century, the corresponding Italian word given for Maltese *meselem* is 'turco', and not 'musulmano' (Cassola 1992b: M 2131).

In another variant of *L-Gharusa tal-Mosta*, she is offered the opportunity to become Queen of the cities of the Levant ("sultana ta' l-ib-

liet"). But the Turks are here perceived by her to be "klieb" ('dogs') and therefore she again refuses to give in. For her, the consequences of her kidnapping are extremely tragic: she has not only lost her promised husband, but she was also to remain a slave for the rest of her life ("Jien ilsira kelli nsir ghal dejjem!").

All in all, however, this variant ends with quite a happy finale: the girl is eventually ransomed by her fiancé, though not before she goes through some very trying moments. In fact, what strikes the reader in a negative way is the mean and unchristian attitude of the closest relatives of the maiden, since both her mother and aunt refuse to part with the sum of 700 (the type of currency is not specified in the ballad), a sum which each one of them does have at home, in exchange, respectively, for their daughter and niece. Had it not been for her loving spouse, the maiden would certainly have never seen her homeland again.

The end result is that one really cannot decide who the real "baddies" are in this ballad: the cruel Turks who treat her more or less kindly or her Christian mother and aunt, who really behave in an unchristian way!

### *The Muslim in an eighteenth-century poem written in Maltese*

One of the first poems written in Maltese where Muslims play a prominent part is *Fuqek nit'haddet Malta* (*I shall talk about you Malta*) (Friggieri 1987a: 43-44), which was written around 1749 by an anonymous author. The poem is about a planned slave uprising in Malta, organised by Mustapha, the Pasha of Rhodes. Luckily for the Maltese, this uprising failed to materialise.<sup>2</sup>

This poem is made up of nineteen quatrains. The mind behind the uprising, Mustapha, is presented in the third quatrain in four or five words, as "Bassà ta' Rodi l-kiefer" ('the cruel Pasha of Rhodes'). What stands out is the adjective "cruel". However, the contemporary Maltese reader of the poem would not be surprised at all to read that the Pasha was cruel. Cruelty was to become the hallmark of any Muslim in Maltese poetry and therefore a Maltese reader expected the Muslim to be cruel. Of course, one does come across certain exceptions, as in the case of the rhyme published in 1909 by the German scholars Bertha Ilg and Hans Stumme. In this rhyme (Friggieri 1987a: 161), we again find a Muslim from the Barbary states described as a Turk from Barbary ("Donnok Tork ta' Barbarija"). This time, however, he is not

<sup>2</sup> On the 1749 planned uprising, cf. Wettinger: in preparation.

employed in menacing attitudes but in an activity which is rather more peaceful in nature, i.e., selling dates in a wicker basket ("bil-kannestru jbig'h it-tamar!"). This scene must have certainly reflected daily reality in Malta, where Muslim slaves selling wares were quite a common occurrence.

However, because of the historical friction between Maltese and Muslims, prejudices embedded themselves in Maltese society and normally Muslims could not be considered anything but cruel! In the same stanza, it is said that many Turks had to come to Malta and others were to sail from the Barbary states ("Barbarija"). Here again all Muslims, whatever their provenance, are associated with being Turks.

The third to the ninth quatrains of this poem are built in such a way as to form a crescendo which highlights the cruel and pitiless manner in which the slaves and their liberators intended to act vis-à-vis the Maltese and their rulers, the Knights of Malta.

In a poem portraying a planned uprising and its expected consequences it is only natural to come across scenes of misery, suffering, and death. But in this poem the author is not content in presenting us with all this imagery: his representation of death and suffering has to be a very morbid one. Therefore, the Knights of St John were not only to be killed, but they had to be torn to pieces and their blood was to be sprinkled in the streets ("Ibiċċru riedu u jqattgħu / Il-Kavallieri lkoll, / Kellhom idewwu demmhom / Ġottriqat ta' Malta wkoll"). This violent and insensitive attitude was not only reserved for the political leaders of the Maltese islands; it was also to be inflicted on the spiritual mentors of the Maltese, i.e., the Catholic ecclesiastics. These were to suffer a dramatic death by being burnt alive until they were all reduced to ashes ("Bil-qassisin u l-irħieb / Xtiequ jagħmlu l-ħġeġġ, / U n-nar ma kiexn jieqaf / Sa ma jaraw 'il kulħadd mejjet").

One would expect innocent creatures, such as children, to be spared such a fate. But in this poem, this was not to be so. While Maltese adults were to be chopped to pieces, babies and infants were not only to be killed but they were to be deliberately trampled upon. The anonymous author wants to be sure that the disrespect of any form of human dignity on the part of the uprising infidels is clearly highlighted ("Hasbu joqtlu t-trabi / U minn fuqhom jgħaddu b'riglejhom, / U lill-Maltin jaħasra/Bis-sjuq iqattgħu f'idejhom").

This hatred towards Christians is also manifested in the spiteful way in which the Christian places of worship were meant to be desecrated by the invading Muslims. Consecrated churches were to be invaded by horses and donkeys, whose dung was to be deposited all over the place! Moreover, what are considered to be the *sancta sanctorum* for

all practising Catholics, the altars, were to be turned into mangers by the invading infidels from the Levant. And this was certainly not meant to be symbolic imagery representing the birth of Christ ("Knejjes imberkin / Isimghu biex kellha tiżżejjen, / (Jidhlu) biż-żwiemel u l-h mir / U jqiegħdu d-demen fir-rkejjien. / Fl-altari konsagrati/Riedu jagħ mlu l-maxturi, / Fejnu ġmielek Malta / Li raw fikom kien dija juri.")!

The lesson to be learnt by the Maltese from this planned uprising, whose failure to materialise is attributed by the author to divine intervention, is that the Maltese were never to trust the Muslim slaves. These are considered to be perpetually wicked people ("kżiena"), for whom no pity should ever be shown and who should always be kept in chains ("Ixgħof darba o Malti / U mil-lsiera ma jkollok liniena, / Żomhom dejjem fil-ktajjen / Għall-qlub tagħhom il-kżiena). The pattern in Maltese poetry is therefore definitely set: the sentiment of hatred and resentment between Muslims and Maltese becomes reciprocal and a quasi-permanent one.

### *Nineteenth-Century Poetry in Maltese*

The Turks are protagonists not only in poems dealing with fighting and warfare; they can also appear in verse with different themes. In the anonymous poem with a religious theme written around 1813, the inhabitants of the town of *Isla* invoke various saints, who are asked to keep the plague which was infesting Malta away from their town (Cassar Pullicino 1964: 43-45). Amongst others, the *Isla* inhabitants plead to the Virgin Mary to protect their town from the infectious disease, and to keep it away in the same way she had kept the Turks away from the Maltese islands for two hundred and fifty years ("O Marija, it-twelid tiegħek / It-Torok keċ u minn Malta bieghed / Għal mitejn ilu u ħamsin sena").

In another poem by Annibale Preca (1832-1901), the author refers to the image of a Muslim in order to convey the negative impression of a stingy person. In this poem, *Il-Haggiġ* (*The Pilgrim to Mecca*) (Friggieri 1987b: 156), the Muslim, or the 'unbaptised one' ("wieħed mhux imghammed") promises Mohammed half the goods he was to find on his way to Mecca, if God granted him the grace of getting there. What he does, however, is very far from what one could call real sharing: he eats a whole bunch of dates ... but keeps the bones for the Prophet; and he gobbles up a whole casket of chestnuts ... and conserves the remains for his Lord! By ending his poem with the following saying: "Darba smajt li min hu xhih, / Li kien jista', 'l Alla jbighh" ('Once I

the author is trying to give a didactic and moral significance to his poetical work. This notwithstanding, it remains quite interesting to note that the author did not cite a Christian example to prove his point.

The 1852 poem *Lill-Maltin (To the Maltese)* (Friggieri 1987a: 84-85), which is attributed to Luigi Bellisario but which is most probably the work of Luigi Rosato, is meant to be a tribute by a foreigner to the Maltese people. Malta is described as the most beautiful place in the world. Amongst other things, it is praised for its ideal geographical location in the middle of the Mediterranean sea, for the perfect configuration of its natural port, for the bounty of its inhabitants and for its might in warfare, despite its minute size. Despite the fact that through the centuries Malta had been involved in various wars and had therefore always encountered quite a "respectable" amount of enemies, amongst them the Carthaginians, the Arabs and the French, it is again the Turks who are identified with the many killers ("qattelin") who roamed through the surrounding seas. Malta is lauded by the author for shedding the blood of thousands of Turks and for keeping them enslaved in chains ("Int dal-baħar indukrajt / Minn kemm resqu qattelin, (Int ċarċart l-eluf tat-Torok / Qalb il-ħdejjed imjassrin").

*Lilek Malta fl-aħjar sena (To Malta, in your prime)* (Friggieri 1997: 120-122), a poem which is to be found in Pietru Pawl Castagna's 1865 historical account of the Maltese archipelago, more or less runs on the same lines as *Lill-Maltin*, albeit in more detail. Malta, personified as a beautiful maiden in her prime, is endowed with all the highest qualities: beauty, strength, and wealth. She is praised for her loyalty to her foreign dominators and for her steadfastness in sticking to the Catholic religion. The picture presented of Malta is such an idyllic and idealistic one, that there is not a single defect to her demerit! Thus, the Maltese bastions are to be considered the most powerful ones; the Maltese climate is of the most benign nature; the products of the Maltese soil are of the sweetest kind; the craftiness of the people in commerce has no par at all elsewhere; while the courage of the Maltese is the envy of one and all!

It is in the context of such courage, typical of the Maltese, that the usual image of the "Gran Tork" appears. Here again the Turk, this time qualified as "grand," is presented in despicable terms since the representative of the half moon ("qamar") is depicted as a dog ("kelb"). *Kelb*, in the Maltese language, has the metaphorical meaning of 'cruel'. The contrast between the positive adjective "gran", which serves to introduce the enemy and to highlight his stature at the same time, and the totally negative noun "kelb" highly contributes to presenting a disparaging picture of the Muslim. This impression is further reinforced in the next two verses, which reiterate that despite the



Turks' many attempts to conquer the island, it was always the Maltese who turned out to be victorious. Thus the "Gran Tork" always had to retreat to his country, a defeated loser ("Tal-Gran Tork iggib b'tifkira / F'halq il-kelb il-qamar tiegħu, / Kemm-il darba riedek gżira / Min-nekġie mighdum tellief").

In his 1847 historical tragedy, *Catarina* (Friggieri 1987b: 51-54), set during the 1565 Siege of Malta and based on the account of Balbi di Correggio (1961: 91-92), Luigi Rosato (1795-1872) introduces an aspect which we had not yet encountered up to now: the vision of the Christian as seen through the eyes of a Muslim. The Muslim in question is the Turkish general Assan who, being deeply intent on capturing Malta and its people, is not able to get any rest or to experience any happiness until he succeeds in his quest. His feelings for the Christians are a spitting image of the Christians' perception of the Muslim. For Assan, the Christians are nothing but cruel people ("kiefier"), who have always been opposed to the Muslims, both those young in age and the old ones, and are therefore worthy only of the appellative of "kelb" ('dog').

Therefore, Assan urges his men to capture the Maltese and to chop their liver to bits. No mercy is to be shown towards them and they are to be annihilated and torn to pieces ("Fwiedhom trietaq irrid nagħmel / ... Xejn titbezzgħu, bicēru, temmu, / Hniena magħhom la turux"). In his thirst for vengeance, Rosato presents to us the Turkish assailant in a really "vampiresque" mood: his is, in fact, an insatiable thirst for Christian blood ("Għandi għatx għal demm l-insara"), a thirst that can only be quenched with the death of the Maltese "klieb". Assan's hatred for the Christians is the fruit of their previous acts of cruelty towards his people. In fact, according to Assan, the Knights of Malta had always been taking booty from and making slaves of his fellow Muslims. Now the time had arrived for the final reckoning and Assan was confident that the famous Turkish Armada would prove its mettle and settle the account with the Maltese ("Jaraw fit il-qilla tagħna, / Għandna armata bliet kbar twahhhax, / Hadd ma jista' llum jilqagh na"). Obviously, the facts of history have proven otherwise.

The automatic identification of the Muslim with Turks in the perception of the Maltese people stands out even more in *Katrin ta' l-Imdina* (Catherine from Mdina) (Friggieri 1987b: 223-225), which was written by Dwardu Cachia (1858-1907). This ballad is set in the Middle Ages, prior to the arrival of the Knights of St John in Malta (1530). The story is about the marriage of a Maltese girl, Katrin, to the anonymous ruler ("Hakem") of Malta. The initial part of the ballad is a festival of colours, music and joy. The whole local population turns out to witness this memorable event, when a young Maltese maiden is going to

marry the ruler of the country, thus obtaining not only a literal social promotion for herself but also a metaphorical one for the whole Maltese people. The marriage bond is here sealed in the most Christian of ways by the monk Bennard in front of all the Maltese, who are exalted at being able to participate in this special event.

The tragedy unfolds in the latter part of the ballad, thus bringing about a total contrast with the initial scene. Ten galleys belonging to enemy raiders land their men in the northern part of the island, *Pwales*, shrouded in total silence. However, the Maltese coast guards identify the invading troops and thus sound out the alarm. Church bells start pealing to warn the population, but the people gathered at Katrin's wedding in the capital town of Malta, *Mdina*, mistake the bells' warning for joyful rejoicing at Katrin's marriage. However, the "Hakem", Katrin's newly acquired husband, is warned of the impending danger and, as leader of the Maltese, he immediately decides to take to the roads to check the invaders.

Up to now, the latter had always been apostrophised as "eghewwa" ('enemies'). Now, instead, the "Hakem" identifies them as Turks who will destroy the village houses ("ghaliex it-Torok / S'er ih arbtu d-djar fir-rhula"). This is, of course, an anachronism, since in the fifteenth century the Ottoman Empire had not yet reached its apex and therefore it only stands to reason that the raiders of the Maltese islands could only have been North African Muslims. But in nineteenth century Malta, Muslims were so much identified spontaneously with Turks, that no reader would have noticed the anachronism.

Once the infidels have been identified, the type of imagery usually associated with them comes up. They are described as "kefrin" ('cruel people'), who destroyed whatever they found in the villages ("Ill harbtu kulma sabu / F'kemm irhula bdew dehlin"). In the ensuing skirmishes which lasted around half a day, the Maltese, ably led by their "Hakem", get the better of the enemy and send off to Mdina, by means of an advance party, the trophies which confirm and seal their victory. These are none other than the chopped off heads of the defeated Turks ("Rjus it-Torok bhāl rebħa / Quddiem baġħtu għall-aħbar"), trophies which seemed to be very common whenever the Maltese and the Turks clashed during the course of history!

Despite the victory, the ballad ends tragically since the "Hakem" is knifed in a treacherous way by a couple of the runaway enemies who, being 'Turks', are obviously again described as deceivers and cruel hearted people ("Qarrieqa u kefrin"). Thus Katrin, just married earlier the same morning, ends up being a wife and a widow on the same day.

This heart rending situation would certainly contribute to creating an even more ominous picture of the Muslim in the perception of the readers of the time.

*Giovanni Antonio Vassallo*

Giovanni Antonio Vassallo (1817-1868) is undoubtedly the first great writer in the history of Maltese literature. Despite having been brought up in a totally Italianate cultural environment, as was normal with people of culture and those forming part of the professional classes right up to the early decades of this century, he was actually one of the first people to realise that in order to communicate with the man in the street he had to adopt the common language, Maltese, and not the cultural one, Italian (Cassola 1983; Friggieri 1986: 128). Therefore, apart from writing various works in Italian, such as his *Scherzi satirici*, he also wrote various other works in the Maltese language. These ranged from light verse, such as *Hrejjeġ u ciai bil-Malti* (*Tales and jokes in Maltese*) (1863), to other tales, with a moral ending, such as *Hrejjeġ ovvero Saggio di favole morali in verso scritti in lingua maltese* (1861), to a veritable epic poem — the first one ever in the Maltese language — *Il Gifen Torc* (*The Turkish Galley*) (1853). Vassallo's great intuition was that Maltese was a suitable literary language, not only for popular poetry with a light theme but also for the highest of genres, i.e., epic poetry.

Vassallo, however, is also to be remembered for his innovative treatment of the Muslim in some of his writings. In fact, he is one of the first Maltese poets, if not the very first, to look upon the so-called infidels with a humane eye. This new point of view is undoubtedly the result of a fruitful combination: Vassallo's open mentality and the relatively recent historical events which Malta had been through. In fact, Napoleon Bonaparte had conquered Malta and ousted the Knights of St John in 1798. One of his first measures was to abolish slavery on the island, even though cases of slaves bought from abroad were still registered until at least 1812 (Wettinger: in preparation). These new local measures, together with Vassallo's democratic disposition which was the result of the romantic ideas of the period, must have certainly helped to bring about the change in the local perception of the Muslim. Indeed, the author already explicitly declares his openness towards the Muslim world in his preface to *Għal chitarra ossia Collezione di nuove poesie maltesi sul gusto delle popolari*, published in 1851, where he states that in olden times heroic odes were composed in Malta to celebrate the capture of booty from the Barbary states by local galleys. 'Thank God', Vassallo comments, 'peace has been definitely been made

with the Turks, and therefore the heroic times are over!" (Cassar Pullicino 1964: 11).

Of course, there are still many instances in Vassallo's poetry where he follows the pattern already established. A case in point is the epic poem *Il-Gifen Torc*. This poem is based on a true episode, i.e., when during the times of Grand Master Manoel Pinto de Fonseca, in the eighteenth century, Maltese galley slaves first managed to overcome their tyrannical masters on board the Turkish galley *La Corona Ottomana* and then to escape to Malta. The epic is divided into three parts. In the first part we are presented with the Maltese slaves who, unable to stand the oppression of their wicked masters, pray to the Virgin Mary to help them in their plight and plan out a way of liberating themselves; the second part is concerned with the fighting on the galley between the Maltese and their oppressors, with the former coming out victors; in the third part we find the freed slaves on a pilgrimage from the capital town of Malta to the Sanctuary of Mellicha, in the northern part of the island, where they fulfil their vow to the Virgin Mary, who had helped them to free themselves from their ordeal (Cassar Pullicino 1964: 109).

In *Il-Gifen Torc* the Knights of Malta, introduced as 'the sons of St. John' ("ulied San Ġwann"), and the Turks, called 'the sons of Mohammed' ("ulied l-Imhammed"), are presented as traditional enemies ("miksura ... għal dejjem kienu"). The cruelty of the Turks stands out in the way they treat their Maltese slaves. These are suffering under the yoke of slavery and harshness ("taħt il-madmad tal-ġasar u l-h ruxija") and are maltreated ("maħqura") and beaten up ("msawta") by the Muslims. In order to reflect their collective heartlessness and lack of humanity, even individual Turks are given an abominable physical appearance. The repelling external appearance is meant to reflect their immoral and inhuman inner feelings, as in the case of the Commander of the Turkish galley, Xerin, who is presented as an old man, ugly as the devil and very harsh in his behaviour. His way of pleasing his Sultan was by grabbing a Christian and having him crucified ("Meta da kien irid ihenni 'l qalbu, / Jaqbad nisrani u fuq salib isallbu")!

These same Turks become really shocked when the tables are turned against them by the Maltese, who had become veritable furies, thus changing the galley they had been slaves in into a proper blood bath ("U f'daqqa wahda nżebagħ kollox demn"). Faced by the wrath of the Maltese, the notoriously cruel Turks now turn into fearful ("imbezzgħha") and trembling ("imriegħhda") lesser beings. Some of them try and squeeze into some minute hiding place ("trekknu x'uħud"), others jump into the sea ("ohrajn il-baħar xte htu"), they all cry, swear and

shake their teeth ("Jibki, jidgħi kulhadd, u jhezhe" snienu"). The image of the Muslim the author is trying to convey is certainly not a positive one!

The same message comes out in *Is-Sultan La Valette lill-Belt Valletta* (Grand Master La Valette addressing Valletta; see Friggieri 1987b: 77-79), which was published in 1843. The sons of Mohammed tried to take Malta over a hundred times ("ulied l-Im-hammed / Li mitt darba gew għalik"), but every time they encountered La Valette's sword they had no choice but to face sure death or run for their lives ("Hadu l-mewt u grew għall-harba"). The interest of the Muslims in Malta is considered by Vassallo to be not so much of a political nature, but more of a religious one. In fact, the Ottomans — here represented by the 'Half Moon' ("Nofs Qamar") — wanted to enslave Malta in order to convert it to Islam and to replace the Bible with the Qur'an ("Mma n-Nofs Qamar ried ijjasrek / U l-Quran go fik igib"). La Valette boasts openly that the cruel Turks ("kiefra") were dispelled by him time and again ("Jien gerrejthom qtajja' qtajja'") and that the 'Half Moon' was thus compelled to mourn its many dead left on the battlefield ("Ahna rbahna u n-Nofs Qamar / Beka d-demm u mar jistrieh"). Again, the negative vision of the Muslim is clear enough for all to see.

The change in Vassallo's attitude towards the Muslims can be seen in the ballad *Almanzor u Marija* (*Almanzor and Marija*) (Cassar Pullicino 1964: 98-101), which I consider to be a transitional step towards the full emancipation of the Muslim in the eyes of the author. The ballad is about the love between Almanzor, a "Turk" from Syria, and the Catholic Maltese maiden, Marija. The young Syrian falls madly in love with Marija and, in order to have the opportunity to speak to her and to declare his love, he dresses up the Christian way and stops her on her way to mass ("Almanzor darba / Fil-ghodu kmieni / Stennieha sejra / Tisma' l-quddies; / Biex lilha jkellem / U jibqa' hieni / Hu ta' Nisrani / libes l-ilbies").

Marija's first reaction is to reject his love. The fact that he is a Muslim acts as an immediate deterrent since she considers him to be on a par with any other Muslim, and thus addresses him as "ghadu" ('enemy') and "kiefer" ('cruel person') ("Xi trid minni, ja għadu? ja kiefer?"). Almanzor, however, does not lose heart and insists on declaring his love for Marija. The latter seems to be unperturbed and tells him not to bother her again. Yet, in doing so she hints at a solution that could be acceptable to her: if Almanzor renounces his faith and takes up the Catholic religion by being baptised, then she would be willing to speak to him ("Ma targa' le quddiem / Jekk ma taqlibx id-din; / 'K int qalbek trid taġhtini / Izzejjien bit-twemmin"). This makes it quite clear

that the real motive behind Marija's refusal, and also behind the generalised prejudice of the Maltese against the Muslims, is a religious one: the Maltese in general, and here Marija, were totally averse to Muslims because they perceived Islam as a threat to Christianity.

In the end, Almanzor does convert to Christianity and is thus accepted by Marija and her parents as her spouse. Both the baptism and the wedding ceremony take place on the same day in church, in front of a happy group of guests. It is interesting to note what transformation Almanzor goes through as soon as he is baptised. First of all, he takes on the new name of Pawlu, a name that is emblematic of Catholicism in Malta since Paul of Tarsus had converted the islanders to Christianity in 60 AD and has, henceforth, been the patron saint of the Maltese. But the greatest transformation is in the author's —and the listener's— perception of him: the Muslim Almanzor who, initially, had been apostrophised by Marija as 'enemy' and 'cruel person', now is acclaimed by all as 'full of saintliness' ("qđusija wera"). The metamorphosis is complete: now that he has converted to Christianity, the diffidence vis-à-vis the Muslim has turned into full acceptance, since he has become 'one of us'!

The concept of acceptance, or at least tolerance, of the Muslim is cemented in Vassallo's 1843 work, *Mannarino* (Friggieri 1987b: 71-77), which celebrates and exalts the Maltese priest Gaetano Mannarino, who was the ringleader in a failed uprising against Grand Master Ximenes towards the latter part of the eighteenth century. In this poem, Mannarino, who has been languishing in jail for many years, is freed by Napoleon Bonaparte himself, who has just taken Malta. In the dialogue between the two, Mannarino criticises the Knights of Malta because they are no longer fulfilling their role of defenders of the faith against the Muslim. On the other hand, however, he has pity on and shows extreme solidarity with the latter when he describes to Napoleon what the Knights used to do. Basically, according to Mannarino, the Knights' few incursions consisted in capturing some *xebec* plying in the Levant ("l'vant") or the barbary states ("Barbarija") and taking the Arabs ("Gharab") in them as slaves.

Vassallo sympathises totally with the victims, since he makes Mannarino describe them as 'poor Arabs' ("Gharab imsejknin"). He also comes up with his own views, when he condemns the selling of the Arabs as slaves. This time the adjective "kefrin" ('cruel') is no longer used to describe the Muslim, as has normally been the case up to now, but to indicate the behaviour of the Christian Knights of Malta ("u jbeghuhom, / Ghax tbeghuhom, o kefrin?..."). The description of the Knights as "kefrin" is even more effective since it is not a Muslim who is pronouncing this judgement, but Mannarino himself, a Catholic

priest. Of course, Mannarino is only voicing Vassallo's total aversion to the concept of slavery.

The author, using Mannarino as a mouthpiece, then goes on to give a 'divine' motivation to his beliefs: people should never be sold as slaves because God never had it written anywhere that human beings were the property of others. The greatest black mark on Europe was, according to Mannarino voicing Vassallo's views, that slavery was still being practised by and large ("Illi bniedem ibighinhehor / Fejnhallih Alla mik-tub? / General, dan fuq l-Ewropa / Narah jiena l-akbar dnub").

Considering that Vassallo expressed these innovative views on the Muslim as early as 1843, he is to be considered a real precursor, a man who was well ahead of his times. In fact, his voice was to remain a lonely cry in the desert since most Maltese authors up to the attainment of Independence (1964) still continued to represent the Muslim according to the traditional negative bias.<sup>3</sup>

It is only now, in recent years, that a culture of tolerance and respect for 'otherness' and 'the others' has asserted itself in contemporary Maltese literature. Hopefully, the efforts of present-day Maltese writers to present in their literary works all peoples as the dignified and equal fruit of the same act of creation will contribute to instil in the Maltese people a better understanding of the ideal of *unity in diversity*, something which theoretically everybody seems to agree upon but which in real everyday life is still so far from materialising.

University of Malta

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<sup>3</sup> Even one of the most avantgardist and progressive figures in Maltese literature, Manuel Dimech (1860-1921), who fought for the emancipation of the Maltese from the darkness and ignorance which engulfed them, continued to describe the Muslims as "cruel sons of Mohammed" ("kefrin ulied Mohammed") in *It-tidrija tad-dghajjes* (*The boat race*; Friggieri 1987b: 248-249) or 'the great enemy of Christ' ("Il-kbir ghadu tal-Mis-lub") in *Sliema ghalik, O Malta taghna!* (*Hail to you, Malta!*; Friggieri 1987b: 245-246).



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